Salve Regina Oral History Project

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Interviewee: Dr. Sarah Littlefield, professor of English literature

Interviewer: Isabelle Gillibrand

Gillibrand: I am Isabelle Gillibrand. I am interviewing Dr. [Sarah] Littlefield on October 29, 2019 for the Salve Regina Oral History Project. Dr. Littlefield has been a professor at Salve Regina since 1991. So to start us off, what brought you here?

Littlefield: Well, I guess the candid response is I needed a job. What had happened, and not to be maudlin, was that my husband had recently passed away. Up until that time, I had been teaching at Bryant University, and although I was qualified in some ways, Bryant, as you may know, is primarily a business college. They had hired me for teaching positions that I never applied for. The year that I needed a job, naturally, there were no jobs. I began applying to different places and had little knowledge of Salve other than the fact, ironically, that when one of my sisters and I were working on our dissertations, we would sometimes go to the Salve library. At that time, the library was in McAuley. It was a perfect place to think and write, particularly on Saturdays when few people were there. We would use the second-floor rooms that overlooked the Cliff Walk and often would open up the windows and let the sea air in. It was just wonderful. I got to know some of the librarians, but other than that experience, I had no knowledge of Salve. And then the year that I was looking for an English position, my sister said, “You know, Salve Regina has an advertisement for an English professor in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed*.” I, of course, applied for it and submitted my materials in May but then never received a response. I was reluctant to call and simply assumed I was on the long list--that it was not a go--and then, lo and behold, in June, I received a call from Sister Esther[[1]](#footnote-1) who--I don’t know whether you’ve heard her name--seemed to do everything here at Salve, including coaching the sailing team. She called and said, “This is Sister Esther, and we want to know if you would like to come to Salve for an interview.” That was the way it started. What had delayed the process were some changes in the English Department, and one of the changes was a new chair. The chair at that time, and you probably wouldn’t have known her, was Dr. Joan David.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Littlefield: Dr. David was the first person at the college to interview me, and her first comment was, “You know, I’ve never done an interview before,” prompting me to think, “Oh, no!” She then said, “So, I went to the library, and I checked out books on how to conduct an interview.” Up until then, I had had several interviews, but Dr. David had a unique interviewing style, beginning with her first question when she asked, “So, what I would like to know is how did a fine person like you get from Idaho to Massachusetts?” My prompt response was, “I’ll never tell you!” and we both laughed and what followed was a great discussion, not a formal interview. Clearly, though, she had scrutinized my materials and deftly directed the discussion. That’s the quick response to your question but the beginning of a wonderful connection.

Gillibrand: Excellent! You mentioned you worked at Bryant before. Dr. Quinn[[3]](#footnote-3) mentioned that you worked in a high school setting. Describe your career pre-Salve.

Littlefield: I had never considered college teaching, but I knew I wanted to teach high school. Well, actually, I originally wanted to teach elementary school but changed my plans during winter break of my first year of college. When the school department heard I was home, they asked me if I would like to substitute. I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity. I had worked at summer camps and was accustomed to working with young children. I just love them! But when you are in a formal school setting and teaching subjects other than arts and crafts and swimming and it’s winter and you’re dealing with little first graders and snowsuits and short attention spans, well, I realized that this was not the grade level for me. That spring, I became a double major—English and Secondary Education. I began my teaching career first in Vermont and then Massachusetts. During that period, I got my master’s at Wesleyan where I also began thinking about going into higher ed. And then at the end of my eighth year of high school teaching, I decided to take a year off and enter a doctoral program. So that was the prelude to my getting into college teaching. As for high school teaching, I taught at two superb high schools with rigorous programs in English and had the opportunity of teaching all grades, all levels, including the honors classes in which I had some incredibly gifted students who went off to Harvard, Yale, the Seven Sisters.[[4]](#footnote-4) I think when I started teaching, first at URI as a TA[[5]](#footnote-5) and then here, I might have had different expectations simply because of the schools where I had taught. I am grateful that I have had a variety of teaching experiences. Having an understanding of high school students, particularly seniors, before they become first-year college students, is so beneficial. High school teaching also provides multiple opportunities to know students’ families. College students, on the other hand, come to us, for better or worse, with a blank slate. This can be good, but when teaching high school, I think we can have more of a sense of the whole person.

Gillibrand: Great! I know this list is probably very long, but what classes have you taught throughout your time at Salve, and has it just been undergraduate, [or] have you dipped into graduate?

Littlefield: I did teach a few graduate courses, but it’s been primarily undergraduate, including a variety of communications and literature courses. I’ve always taught first-year students. As you know, the Core program has undergone many revisions, but I’ve always wanted to teach first-year students. At Salve, and particularly in our department, we become essentially generalists. We teach everything. When I came here, Dr. David assigned me the American literature courses, which was not my area of expertise. My area is actually British literature, nineteenth century, particularly nineteenth century women. At any rate I, of course, accepted the assignment and the challenge and have been very grateful for this opportunity. In addition to a range of American lit courses, I have also taught Literary Masterpieces, the Literary Landscape of Newport, and a variety of Special Topics[[6]](#footnote-6) courses.

Gillibrand: Dr. Quinn mentioned that you got really into Newport literature and worked with a lot of local authors and things along those lines. How did you get that interest? What’s your experience been working with them?

Littlefield: How that actually started--in addition to the fact that I had included in some of my courses authors connected with Newport—began when I was contacted by the Edith Wharton Society. They wanted to explore the possibility of running their conference at Salve and wanted to know if I would be interested in co-sponsoring or co-directing this conference. Of course, I was, having taught several of Edith Wharton’s works. Two chapters, for example, in *The Age of Innocence* are set in Newport. And Edith Wharton and her family once lived in Newport. That’s essentially how it started. The conference was excellent. As a matter of fact, Dr. Harrington-Lueker[[7]](#footnote-7) and I, plus a Salve student and a woman from the Preservation Society,[[8]](#footnote-8) organized a panel, and we were told it was the best panel! It was great. It was collaborative. Dr. Harrington-Lueker nearly ruined her eyesight investigating her topic! The title of the panel was, “At Your Service.” What we featured were images of servants from different angles. What, for example, was needed to maintain a mansion like the Breakers. Dr. Harrington-Lueker provided a journalistic perspective and combed through one year of, I think, the *Newport Mercury*. It was all on microfiche. She found three ads in which Edith Wharton advertised for a cook and I think a maid and, maybe, a chauffeur. The Edith Wharton Society thought it was wonderful. The Salve student discussed what a lady’s maid would need to do for her mistress to have lovely hands and beautiful hair. I provided a literary perspective and explored Wharton’s images of servants in the *House of Mirth*. This conference, plus the research, intensified my interest in Newport. We then held two other literary conferences featuring authors who have had ties to Newport. The second was the Henry James Conference, and the third one, the most recent, was Wilder, Thornton Wilder. You must, being a New Hampshirite, know him. Did you read *Our Town*?

Gillibrand: I can’t remember.

Littlefield: Well, then, you need to put that on your reading list as it takes place in New Hampshire! At any rate, the conferences and my conference presentations initiated and continued my interest in Newport. Also, at two of the conferences, I was asked to conduct tours of Newport. I don’t know whether you know Dan Titus[[9]](#footnote-9), but Dan and I, for example, organized a tour for the Thornton Wilder Conference. I also planned a special topics course, now part of the curriculum, The Literary Landscape of Newport. We read works by such Newport authors as Henry James and Edith Wharton, as well as ‘*Twas the Night Before Christmas*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Anyway, that is a long answer to your question.

Gillibrand: Fabulous! One of the other projects and things that you were involved with was the summer program with Swiss teachers.

Littlefield: Yes! And Dr. Quinn wanted to know some of the special moments? … I will tell you, they were special. Summer now seems incomplete as the program ended several years ago. I have wonderful memories. They were so enthusiastic, and even though there may have been issues with language, they were just so interested and dutiful and engaged. It was a three-week program, and the highlight was a formal banquet in Ochre Court at the end of the session. The banquet would differ from year to year, but one year, the women dressed in gowns, and both the men and women sang traditional Swiss school songs and gave eloquent speeches about their experience here. The banquet usually coincided with the [Newport] Jazz Festival. One summer evening when we left Ochre Court and were strolling across the drive, what did we hear but wonderful jazz coming from the Tennis Hall of Fame on the opening night. We all thought it was magical! I don’t know what moments Dr. Quinn might be thinking of. He might not have been thinking of anything in particular, but one funny memory features Henry James and his story *Daisy Miller*, which takes place in Switzerland and the reason for my assigning it. As a lead up to the story, I provided some contextual stories including one in which Henry James praised the Swiss, considering the incredibly polite. As I was telling the Swiss how polite James found the Swiss to be, a movie was being filmed on the grounds outside the classroom. Joaquin [Phoenix] starred in it. Just as I was emphasizing Swiss politeness, the director of the program, Pierre-Eves,[[11]](#footnote-11) came in and said very quietly, “Woody Allen is out on the lawn.” Do you know, like that \*snaps fingers\* they deserted me! They just ran out of the classroom with their cameras and onto the lawn because they love his films. One woman even climbed a tree to photograph Allen. Of course, I teased them after that. It became a standard joke, and although they were apologetic, I wasn’t insulted. The timing, though, was perfect. The only other thing that Dr. Quinn may have been thinking was that the Swiss did not like our air conditioning. Did you hear that story?

Gillibrand: I did not.

Littlefield: Uhhhhh, they did not like American air conditioning! And they were here in steamy July, so you can imagine how insufferable our non airconditioned classrooms were. We respected their wishes, though, and turned off the air conditioning. They just could not understand our need for air conditioning. As you can imagine, there are lots of stories. They were wonderful, and they spoiled us.

Gillibrand: And you mentioned the language sometimes being a challenge… as you would expect. Were there any other challenges with teaching teachers that are from a foreign country, or was there a learning curve with teaching fellow teachers as opposed to teaching students?

Littlefield: I think what was impressive about the Swiss [is] if they didn’t understand something, they would ask. They weren’t timid. They were incredibly engaged, and if there were a learning curve, particularly during the first years of the program, Dr. Quinn and Dr. Neary[[12]](#footnote-12) divided them into groups according to language proficiency. It just seemed as if over the years, the majority were quite proficient. Teaching teachers was invigorating. They were generally careful readers and had fascinating insights and opinions and asked questions that often led to some rich discussions. They also understood and appreciated the work that went into a lesson plan. The majority taught elementary-age children. There were some who were college professors. The majority were musicians, so they incorporated music into their lessons and would play instruments for the children and sing. What was lovely was learning about the Swiss public educational system. For example, I was unaware that they would be with a class for at least five years, meaning they were proficient in a variety of academic subjects. I found this approach most interesting. They really got to know their students.

Gillibrand: That’s all excellent. I kind of wish they were still doing that.

Littlefield: Well, I suppose there can be advantages and disadvantages because what if a child simply doesn’t connect with a teacher. I’m sure, however, that there are things they do to offset any kind of conflict.

Gillibrand: So during your time at Salve, have you been on any of the different committees?

Littlefield: I’ve been on some of the major committees over the years, elected ones and volunteer ones. I suppose two of the most significant ones is rank and tenure and grievance. I’ve also served on the sabbatical committee, as well as review and core committees. So many!

Gillibrand: You mentioned Joan David at the beginning, but whether it be she or others, are there people at Salve that you’ve worked really closely with throughout your career and felt have really influenced your time here?

Littlefield: Well, certainly, Dr. David and Sister Pat[[13]](#footnote-13) as well as Dr. Svogun and Dr. Bailey.[[14]](#footnote-14) They interviewed me, with the exception of Dr. Bailey, who was away at the time. My department as a whole has been most helpful and collegial as have people in all the departments at Salve. Dr. Quinn certainly. One year, we did a type of team teaching with the Pell students. He featured the history and I did the literature and we also took some field trips.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Gillibrand: And going off of that, Sister Therese[[16]](#footnote-16) and Sister Jane[[17]](#footnote-17) have been the two presidents to serve, and now there’s Kelli Armstrong[[18]](#footnote-18) who recently [started]. What’s been your experience working with Sister Therese and Sister Jane because you’ve been here essentially throughout the entirety of both their terms.

Littlefield: … Actually, when I came, Sister Lucille McKillop was president [[19]](#footnote-19) and then Sister Therese and then, as you said, Sister Jane. Sister Therese was the president I particularly knew for a variety of reasons. I was, for example, chair of the English department when she was president, so I had many meetings with her. Then one of the research projects that I was involved in was a study of Wakehurst. One year, Dr. Jayme Hennessy,[[20]](#footnote-20) who has been a wonderful colleague as has Dr. Gibbons[[21]](#footnote-21) in math whom I should also mention…Do you know Dr. Hennessy?

Gillibrand: … I worked with her because I’m a tutor for one of the classes that she taught.

Littlefield: Dr. Hennessy and Sister Therese and I did a collaborative presentation on Wakehurst. Although I didn’t have the same connection with Sister Jane, I always felt that if I needed to seek her out, I certainly could.

Gillibrand: Did you have a lot of interaction with Sister Lucille when you first got here or was it a pretty quick turnaround?

Littlefield: It was a quick turnaround, but she was most personable, and she made an effort to meet new professors. She invited me to her office so that she could get to know me. That was lovely. The presidents have all interacted with the faculty in different ways. Sister Lucille, for example, had lovely holiday dinners for us in Ochre Court. Sister Therese at the beginning of her term, hosted coffee hours in her home. We were invited to sign up for them, and there would be around ten of us at each, and we would have a great time talking about a variety of topics. Dr. Armstrong seems to have continued that practice because she’s been hosting luncheons. They’ve been in the library and again, small groups, giving her a chance to get to know us. That’s been nice.

Gillibrand: Excellent… Have you gotten to know Dr. Armstrong since [she’s] been here, or where she’s still so new and in demand [not so much]?

Littlefield: … Not really, other than seeing her and talking to her but again in group settings. She’s been here for so few months. I met her for the first time at her August gathering and then saw her, of course, at the inauguration, and then, most recently, last week, when we joined her for lunch. That basically has been it.

Gillibrand: That leads into the next question pretty well because all of the other three presidents that we had talked about before have been Sisters of Mercy whereas now Dr. Armstrong, she’s the first layperson. That leads into a nice transition of how have you seen Salve change throughout the years?

Littlefield: I think certainly one major change over the years has been the Core, which, since I have been here, has been revised three times. I am hesitant to say that this is a result of different presidents and/or academic administrators. What has also changed is that as we become not necessarily larger but more involved in our subject matter, we have become separated from one another. For example, since the History Department moved from Antone to McAuley, we now rarely see them unless we happen to teach in the same building at the same time or serve on a committee or we get together socially. That’s a major change. I think the college has done a great job in bringing in students who are better prepared, more focused, and aware of what they want to major in--more purposeful perhaps than the students I had when I first came here. The college has clearly wanted to advance us academically and to help students professionally. There was a recent article in the *Washington Post* written by an economist about why we need the English major. You would appreciate this, for you and I know that English majors and history majors have skills that are incredibly transferable. I think what is disturbing for me is that Salve advertises itself as a liberal arts institution, but I think more and more the focus has been on the professional departments. When I first came here--and before we had a strong communications department--we had at least forty, maybe even over forty, literature majors, and the senior thesis presentations needed to be scheduled two weekends in a row. Today, the majority of English majors have selected communications. The job market is the reason. I wish there were a way that we could convince students and their parents and Salve of the advantages of studying literature—of the liberal arts. This is a poor paraphrase, but essentially one of the points in *The Washington Post* article is that, yes, students who go into high tech jobs or business-oriented jobs get the big bucks at the start, but then years later, when people are in their thirties or their forties, the salaries level out. The people who have degrees in English or history--their salaries begin to go up because of what they’ve been able to do. If the college is going to advertise itself as a liberal arts institution, I wish we were more proactive in promoting philosophy, history, English and point out that students with these majors have incredible skills. Our current president is a perfect example, having both undergraduate and graduate degrees in literature. I sometimes jokingly refer to my students as literary sleuths when they are working on a research project or arguing a point with supportive evidence but, ironically, a former student of mine who was a literature major started up a detective agency in Boston. When you read history or you read literature, you’re looking not only at the big picture and themes but also at the details because you want to be sure that you can provide the evidence to support a theory or a thesis. That becomes transferable, doesn’t it? Anyway, I know, I am speaking to the choir!

Gillibrand: … Preaching to the choir! From your perspective, what do you see for Salve’s future, and that kind of…

Littlefield: … I think that is the major thing! I have been curious, though, about Sister Jane’s effort to have upperclassmen live on campus.

Gillibrand: The never-ending struggle!

Littlefield: I wasn’t sure what you thought about that… I don’t know whether students were included in the study, but the goal apparently is to keep students on campus in an effort build more of a community beyond classroom time. What was the question? \*Laughing\* I know, where do I see the college or where would I like to see the college go in the future? I think, again, to emphasize the significance of the liberal arts. Also, to work more with the resources that we have in Newport. For example, offering collaborative experiences with, say, the Preservation Society, with the [Newport] Historical Society, with IYRS. We already do some things, but I think there are multiple and rich opportunities where we could collaborate in ways that would be incredibly fruitful for students. I’d like to see the cultural and historic preservation program get built up again. They sponsored a significant conference, spearheaded by Dr Richard Guy Wilson, an architectural historian at the University of Virginia. Do you know him?

Gillibrand: Sounds familiar.

Littlefield: What I loved about him--Salve gave him an honorary degree—is that he’s a true Renaissance man and interested in and so knowledgeable about history, architecture, the history of architecture, as well as literature. He’s the one who first made me aware of the significance of Edith Wharton’s incorporation and use of architecture in her novels to advance her themes. For example, if you were to read *The House of Mirth*, she includes architectural details, descriptions, of a home or of a library while at the same time subtly providing glimpses of the family or of a character. I know that Salve recognizes the importance of collaboration. I am hopeful that the university will make this easier to manage so that if, for example, Dr. Quinn or Dr. Neary or Dr. Leeman[[22]](#footnote-22) and I would like to offer a team-taught course, it wouldn’t be so difficult to schedule. I am also hopeful that teaming up with places in Newport like the Newport Historical Society or the Tennis Hall of Fame will also be more manageable, beginning with transportation. Taking my first year students to IYRS to enrich their reading of Stephen Crane’s *The Open Boat* has been invaluable. Have you been down to IYRS? It’s the International Yacht Restoration School and Trade…

Gillibrand: I think I’ve been at least in that area.

Littlefield: It’s fascinating. In addition to other programs, they have a two-year program in wooden boat building. They also have an amazing library. To be able to offer a course that would incorporate the ocean, boats, and have access to their library--to team up with one of the instructors--would be such a rich experience. Anyway, that’s a pipe dream. I’ll just give one more thought--I could go on forever--but the other is being able to integrate into our courses field trips, which now is very difficult. I mentioned this to Dr. Armstrong at our luncheon. When I want to take my students to IYRS or I want to take them to the Save the Bay Aquarium--and this is for, again, the course I teach that features the ocean--it’s difficult to arrange on many levels, from scheduling, booking a van or vans, and, finding a driver as there as there are very few. It can also be costly…

Gillibrand: Those are all very important, especially where we’re surrounded by so much.

Littlefield: We’re surrounded by so much! Today I started a unit featuring Longfellow, who wrote a poem called “The Skeleton in Armor.” It incorporates Stone Tower down at Touro Park. Then there’s the connection to the Vikings and to McAuley, which originally was Vinland… For the Longfellow unit, I’ve also collaborated with Touro Synagogue as one of the poems that he wrote is called “The Jewish Cemetery At Newport.” To be able to visit these places and meet with the experts is just so rich. That’s enough. I won’t even say any more! \*Laughter\*

Gillibrand: Well, I was going to ask… because that was the last of my questions, but any additional comments?

Littlefield: Well, I was going to say to you before or after you graduate that you should read Thornton Wilder’s novel *Theophilus North,* which takes place almost totally in Newport. Dr. Quinn can tell you about it because he did a conference presentation on it. We organized a panel for a conference. Actually, we did two conference presentations, one for the American Literature Association and the other for the Thornton Wilder International Conference. The novel takes place, in theory, just after World War I. Dr. Quinn has other theories! I think you would be intrigued by it because it takes place totally in Newport, so there are names that you would recognize. That’s just a final thought.

Gillibrand: I love it! I’m always looking for new books…

1. Sister Esther Whalen was the director of protocol at Salve Regina for over 30 years and the founder of the Salve sailing team. She passed away in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Joan David taught English and Theater for almost fifty years, and died in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dr. John Quinn is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Seven Sisters include Barnard College, Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, Vassar College, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley and Radcliffe College. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Referencing the University of Rhode Island and the position of teaching assistant. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Relating to Salve Regina’s special topics courses which are specialized courses which alternate in different semesters. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dr. Donna Harrington-Lueker is a professor in the English, Communications and Media Department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Referring to the Preservation Society of Newport County, an organization which preserves a variety of properties in Aquidneck Island including the Breakers. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dan Titus is associate director of User Support Services at Salve Regina as well as an adjunct professor in the Business Studies and Economics Department. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The book was written by Clement Clarke Moore. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pierre-Fres Martin, the director of the swiss teachers program. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dr. Timothy Neary is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sister Patricia Combies was in the Salve Regina class of 1965 along with being a professor in the English Department and Dean of Undergraduate Students at Salve Regina. Sr. Pat Combies participated in the Oral History Project in June of 2018, and her interview is available in the Salve Regina Archive’s Digital Commons. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dr. Norma Bailey is a professor in the English, Communications and Media Department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dr. Littlefield mentioned after the fact she wanted to give consideration to Brother John Buckley from the history department as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dr. M. Therese Antone, RSM served as president of the university from 1994-2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sister Jane Gerety served as president of Salve Regina University from 2009-2019. Sister Jane participated in the Salve Regina Oral History Project before her retirement in 2019. The three interviews are available at Salve Regina Archive’s Digital Commons. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dr. Kelli Armstrong is the eighth president of Salve Regina University. She was inaugurated in fall of 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Sister Lucille McKillop was the president of Salve Regina from 1973 to 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dr. Jayme Hennessy is a professor and chairwoman of the Religious and Theological Studies Department at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dr. Carol Gibbons has been a math professor at Salve Regina since 1989. Dr. Gibbons participated in the Oral History Project in March of 2019. Her interview is available through Salve Regina Archive’s Digital Commons. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Dr. William Leeman is a history professor at Salve Regina. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)